

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

# When High-Potential Talent Fails the Organization

A Discussion of Key Management Issues

WHAT WE THINK

**Once the excitement of the promotion fades, every high-potential executive faces a harsh reality—the need to deliver. For a lucky few, the transition is seamless, almost effortless.**

For the majority, it requires trial and error, self-reflection, and a significant amount of adjustment before they begin to see results.

*Diana was panicking. She had entered her first regional role with much promise and widespread endorsements. She knew what was needed and had a strong set of responses that had always worked. But as the metrics fell, Diana finally had to admit that she was spinning her wheels without results. She feared that someone would soon recognize her as a fraud, unable to live up to her high-potential status.*

Our research shows it can take senior executives up to 18 months to completely integrate and feel productive in a new position. Even those with seemingly limitless upward potential eventually find themselves at a pivotal point: the place at which fundamental shifts in approach and style are required.

### Early Warning Signs

The primary cause of derailment among recently promoted high-potential talent is a fundamental failure to shift time, focus, and energy toward adapting to their new level of responsibility. This need extends to virtually every aspect of the role. The work becomes less tactical and more strategic. The

executive gets further removed from the front-line, day-to-day operations and more responsible for the longer-term time horizon. The complexity of relationships, business models, and sources of data increases exponentially. To successfully transition to broad-scale leadership, high potentials must reinvent themselves in their new roles—how they distribute their attention, interact with stakeholders, and set their priorities.

There are several common pitfalls that emerge as leaders expand their scope. If newly promoted high potentials (and their managers and mentors) watch for these risk behaviors, they can correct course quickly when needed and reduce the likelihood of the executive's heading too far down an unsuccessful path:

- Failure to readjust their time to focus on broader, more critical issues—more time spent “doing” than “leading”
- Failure to establish new networks and uncover hidden dynamics and agendas leads to isolation and disconnection from key sources of information

- Reliance on old data sources causes narrow decision making that oversimplifies the complexity of issues at more senior levels
- Underestimating the interconnected nature of leadership at senior levels results in missing key points of alignment and influence
- Failure to appreciate their broadening power and influence
- Generating unintended messages with unanticipated consequences

### Building a New Toolbox

While executives are primarily responsible for their own transitions, the entire enterprise can support their efforts to successfully scale. Putting into place key actions and support systems will accelerate the shifting mindset and rebuilding of an effective leadership toolbox.

#### 1. Define Success

To know whether you have been successful, you must first define what good looks like. Recognize that “good” in a broader role will look and feel different from how you measured success in the past.

In collaboration with your manager, internal and external customers, and other key stakeholders, develop a clear set of objectives with defined and measurable metrics. This will be the catalyst for you to shift your focus, attention, and behavior to a new plan of leadership.

## 2. Redefine Your Leadership

Craft a new leadership agenda for yourself by answering the following questions:

I was good at putting out fires; now how will I stop them from happening?  
 I excelled at short-term goals; how will I prepare for five years out?  
 My career to date has been in a single function; how do I expand my reach beyond my pyramid?  
 I was a master of face-to-face communication; how do I influence from a distance?  
 I was good at getting things done; how will I get out of the way and allow others to execute?  
 I followed; how will I now build followership?

## 3. Seek New Inputs

Whether it's customer data, performance metrics, teammates, consultants, professional groups, or published material, you will need to expand the sources that inform your thinking.

Be selective about where you commit your time. Choose high-value networking opportunities, project groups, strategic committees, and external groups that will quickly open your lens to a new way of thinking about the business and will help you discard old models of thinking and leading that will no longer serve you well.

- Pay attention to the metrics and stakeholders that matter now
- Ask for guidance from a broad and diverse audience
- Look for role models who have recently transitioned successfully
- Find a mentor or trusted advisor who knows your space well

## The Bottom Line

To avoid derailing when scaling leadership skillsets for increased scope:

- State clearly what success looks like
- Outline the difference between your old and new leadership levels
- Recognize problems and act early in the integration process
- Seek feedback from numerous sources

## ABOUT RHR INTERNATIONAL

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